NEW YORK TIMES
JUN 10 1956

Milestones on the Victory Road

EISENHOWER'S SIX GREAT DECISIONS: Europe, 1944-45. By Gen. Walter Bedell Smith, U. S. A. (Ret.). 237 pp. New York: Longmans, Green & Co. $3.95.

By HANSON W. BALDWIN

THE "awful responsibility" of the commander and the "absolute" nature of the military chain of command are the threads upon which this narrative is loosely strung. The loneliness of power and the consequences of its use have long fascinated historians, biographers and novelists. This book—a series of military essays—attempts to isolate, define and reconstruct the major and fundamental decisions which were milestones on the victory trail from Normandy to the Elbe. Dwight D. Eisenhower as Supreme Commander of the Allied Expeditionary Force in 1944 and 1945 is the hero. His Boswell is his then Chief of Staff and alter ego, Walter Bedell Smith, who has now retired to private business after distinguished post-war service to his country in military and civilian posts.

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"Eisenhower's Six Great Decisions" was originally published as a series of articles in The Saturday Evening Post in 1946. They are now assembled in book form with little change except in the addition of opening and closing chapters and short connectives.

WHEN first brought out, these essays were topical, fresh in fact and treatment. They were not history. Today, they have suffered from the attrition of time; in the ensuing ten years far more detailed and definitive historical accounts have been published. Records not then available (particularly German accounts) have been tapped in the Army official history series and in other works. This book suffers by comparison. It conveys the impression of hasty issuance; there are some contradictions and there is considerable repetition. The book strains, as the original articles did, to make a point—that the Supreme Commander's authority was of an untrammeled and absolute nature.

There is no doubt that Eisenhower had great responsibilities during World War II—but his power as Supreme Commander was subject to very definite and major checks. He had no control over, or detailed knowledge of, Soviet plans. Moreover, a theatre commander in modern war is more of a general manager than a Napoleonic general. Modern strategic plans are the product of many minds—rarely of one. And even command functions, as the Pentagon today attests, have been watered down. Eisenhower was not only subject to political authority in both Washington and London, but he also acted as an instrument of the Combined (Anglo-American) Chiefs of Staff who were the principal architects of general global strategy. Eisenhower's staff, "an extension (as General Smith notes) of "his mind," did much of the general theatre planning.

This is not to say that Eisenhower, as supreme commander, did not have responsibility, did not make decisions. He did.

But some of them, when they had passed through the military sieve, were obvious, inevitable.

The six key "decisions," as General Smith outlines them, were:

(1) Eisenhower's decision to risk dubious weather prospects and launch the invasion of Normandy on June 6, 1944.

(2) His approval in early August, 1944, of Gen. Omar N. Bradley's plan to trap the German Seventh Army in the Falaise pocket.

(3) His movement of reserves to Bastogne, St. Vith and elsewhere in reaction to the German counter-offensive in the Ardennes in December, 1944.

(4) His decision to maximize enemy casualties and to bleed the German Army to impotence west of the Rhine.

(5) The encirclement of the Ruhr.

(6) The drive eastward across Germany—its objective

General Eisenhower and para[illegible] Airborne Division on D-Day Mi[illegible] 44.

the destruction of the remnants of the German Army, rather than the capture of Berlin.

The last "decision" if, indeed, these intricate events fit into so neat a term, will always be the most controversial one to historians. It yielded military dividends and political liabilities. General Smith makes it clear there was little thought of the political consequences in those days of victory; indeed, General Eisenhower does not bear the main blame for this oversight, for he was primarily a soldier—the architect of victory, not the builder of the post-war peace.

The factors that apparently persuaded Eisenhower and his subordinates (with the approval of his superiors) to abandon Berlin as an objective were several. The "one inflexible rule—'Destroy the German forces, speedily and completely'"—had dominated our European strategy since the war's beginning. The desire for an orderly junction along the Elbe with the advancing Russian armies and the proximity of the Russians to Berlin were other factors. The fear that the Germans might plan indefinite resistance in the so-called "National Redoubt" in the Alps was another factor in the direction of our final offensive into Germany. And occupation plans, already agreed to, had put the Eastern boundaries of American and British zones some 200 miles west of Berlin.

These are compelling reasons and there are others unmentioned—the prevalent state of mind that then existed vis-a-vis the Russians; some personality conflicts, and so on. But without political accomplishments warfare is sterile slaughter. And if American and British troops had first raised their colors in Berlin and in Prague — and had stood their ground — in that spring of 1945, we might not now be reaping so fully the aftermath of recrimination and regret.